

February 9, 2008 - Army to Boost Perks for Recruits

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Army to boost perks for recruits
\$15b plan includes mortgage aid, school; Effort is in response to drop in enlistees

By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | February 9, 2008

WASHINGTON - To relieve the wartime strain on ground troops and meet a mandate to expand the force, the Army plans to offer a series of new and costly incentives, including a home mortgage fund and a military prep school for high school dropouts, to help draw in a shrinking pool of eligible volunteers, according to military officials and federal budget documents.

After lowering its own education standards and accepting a rising number of recruits who would have been considered unfit a few years ago, the Army's initiatives - costing a large part of the \$15 billion it will receive to add more soldiers - underscore the difficulty it faces in signing up enough young men and women to add 65,000 soldiers to its ranks over the next three years.

The new push also highlights growing concern that the Iraq war and the need to lower standards in order to meet recruiting quotas may be causing long-term damage to the all-volunteer force.

"Some of these [new recruiting efforts] are unprecedented," said David Johnson, a senior political scientist at the government-funded Rand Corporation who specializes in national security affairs. "They have to get people to join in a very tough market. Everybody knows part of the contract [for enlisting] in the ground forces is you are going to go to Iraq and Afghanistan at least once.

"Because it has struggled to enlist highly qualified young people, the Army has already resorted to accepting more recruits who have not finished high school, even though the military considers a high school diploma a key predictor of success. The service has also granted a rapidly increasing number of waivers to young men and women who have failed other fitness standards, including those with criminal records and medical problems.

The military has historically provided a variety of benefits to compensate troops for their service - most notably the GI Bill, which gave World War II veterans money for college. In recent years, the Army has emphasized to recruits the advanced training they will receive, skills that could help them land a high-tech civilian career, and the force has provided increasingly sizable cash bonuses to lure enlistees and persuade more soldiers to reenlist.

Now the Army is taking its efforts to find qualified 18- to 24-year-old recruits to another level, through a combination of financial benefits that would accrue long after new soldiers complete their Army career and a series of new programs intended to help less qualified young people meet the military's eligibility requirements.

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the percentage of Army recruits with a high school diploma has plunged from 94 percent to 71 percent. The percentage requiring so-called "moral" waivers for past criminal behavior or drug abuse and others waivers for medical conditions has nearly tripled since 2003, to 12 percent.

In the budget he presented to Congress this week, President Bush allocated \$15 billion to meet Congress's mandate to expand the Army, including nearly \$700 million for enlistment and reenlistment bonuses, according to Pentagon budget materials and senior officials. But about \$4 billion has been set aside for pay and benefits, including the new recruiting incentives.

Anticipating that it will get the money, the Army has launched a new preparatory school at Fort Jackson, S.C., to simultaneously train and educate high school dropouts. The school, already partially funded by the Army and available to any recruit nationwide, is designed to prepare volunteers who want to join but don't meet the education standards.

"This is an opportunity to bring [in] highly qualified young men and women who don't have an education credential," Major General Thomas P. Bostick, chief of the Army Recruiting Command, explained to a Senate panel on Jan. 31. Another novel recruiting initiative is an Army extension school, located in a Pittsburgh mall, where high school dropouts can earn their diploma by attending classes part-time before enlistment. The Army plans to expand the program to other locations around the country if the pilot program in Pittsburgh proves successful.

Meanwhile, a new Army website - called Mission 2 Success - offers study aids and other instructional materials to help applicants pass military entrance exams. And the service is recruiting volunteer civilian tutors to help enlistees pass the military aptitude test.

Better educated recruits, especially those with high school diplomas, are considered critical to the success of today's high-tech military. "The technology today is so much superior than it was when I was in the Marine Corps," US Representative John Murtha, a Pennsylvania Democrat and veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars, told the Center for Strategic and International Studies on Thursday. "Today I couldn't find my way around, the technology is so much greater. You have to have the ability to work this technical stuff, and it's not there." Other new recruiting incentives offer lifetime benefits to enlistees.

One new program would offer financial benefits now available only to retired military veterans of past wars - money from the Army to purchase a home or start a business in return for a four-year term of service. "Through this exclusive Army program, soldiers can receive up to \$40,000 to buy a home or start a small business upon completion of service," according to a program description.

"Whatever your goals are, the Army provides you with more ways to help achieve them.

"The first recruiting battalions to offer the benefits to its enlistees will be in Alabama, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Washington, officials said.

Johnson, the Rand national security specialist, said it remains unclear "what the attraction will be" for these new incentives, given that many of them are untested. But even if they draw more enlistees, the incentives may not be enough to overcome the deterrent factor of Iraq and help the Army grow.

An independent government study recently warned that the Army "may have to increase recruiting and retention incentives" to reach its goals.